**Helping teens see a future while getting through today**

By Dallas Morning News, adapted by Newsela staff

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When Jordan Henderson was 18 he was arrested for drug distribution. He has turned his life around and now sees a positive future. "I always thought it would be much better to be dead than in jail," he said in his Richardson, Texas, neighborhood on May 9, 2014.

DALLAS — Growing up in a tough Dallas neighborhood, Jordan Henderson saw just two options for his future — jail or the graveyard.

"I always thought it would be much better to be dead than in jail," Henderson said.

With little to look forward to, the 18-year-old began to get involved in drugs and other criminal activity. He prayed that he would live to see 21.

Henderson’s choices should not come as a surprise, according to a recent University of Texas at Dallas study. Researchers found that teens who believe they will die young are more likely to commit crimes. And the crimes they commit tend to be more serious.

**How Long Will You Live?**

The study asked one question of more than 1,300 young people in Arizona and Pennsylvania who have committed serious crimes: How long do you think you’ll live? Their answers ranged from 16 to 200 years old. Researchers then checked in with them from time to time over seven years and asked them whether they had committed new crimes.

The youths who went on to commit the most crimes were the ones with a short-term mentality. They didn't think they'd live very long. The group of young offenders, who could imagine they had a future, were able to successfully put a life of crime behind them.

“You can’t just say all of these serious offenders are all bad and they’re all going to be bad forever,” said UTD criminologist Alex Piquero.

Piquero, who led the study, said letting kids know “that your life now is not destiny” can make a difference.

“We can turn some of these kids around if we give them these opportunities” and the same messages, he said.

For a long time, Henderson felt he had neither. He didn't know any adults who went to college, and many sold drugs, he said. Earlier this year, Henderson was arrested for selling marijuana.

“I basically had no visible hope,” he said. “I thought to myself, this is the lifestyle that everybody before me shows, this is the lifestyle that everyone around me is doing and this is the lifestyle I have to choose."

He said he felt that he had no choice.

**Surviving Each Day**

That’s a mindset that 15-year-old Merl Lovings of DeSoto, Texas, can relate to. His father is serving a 15-year prison sentence on a charge of aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon.

Last year, Lovings said he stole a BB gun and intended to sell it.

Lovings believes he’ll live to be about 50 or 60, but right now, he worries a lot about how to provide for his young brother and sister. He recently began selling candy to help support his family.

He spends less time focusing on his own future. He has vague ideas of joining the Navy or pursuing a rap career.

Piquero said that’s typical for many young lawbreakers. “They have to basically survive today, and they can’t even think about 30 years from now,” he said.

Piquero said he hopes the government will give more opportunities to teens from poor families.

But he said parents and teachers can also have a huge impact. They need to tell teens that success is possible and encouraging them to develop long-term goals.

**Turning Teens Around**

Chad Houser has seen how an honest day’s work, combined with a simple pat on the back, can make all the difference.

Houser is executive director of Dallas-based Cafe Momentum. The nonprofit restaurant provides jobs to young men coming out of jail. They go to school without textbooks and worry about their next meal. They live in neighborhoods overrun with trash, and with guns around every corner.

In their world, an early death isn’t just a possibility, it’s a reality they accept. Houser said he’s never heard a teen talk about living beyond age 20.

But their attitudes change when they're put to work preparing and serving food at some of the best restaurants.

For the first time in their lives, many feel a sense of approval and the joy that comes from living up to expectations, he said. They begin to have something to live for and work toward.

“It works in every case,” Houser said. “When you give them hope and encouragement and literally, as silly as it sounds, a pat on the back, a ‘good job,’ it changes their" attitude, he said.

As for Henderson, his arrest for marijuana turned out to be a turning point. He enrolled in school and will now attend Fisk University in Tennessee.

Henderson now hopes he can live into his 90s to see his children and grandchildren.

“I pray that I live to see the generational curse I’m so accustomed to be broken,” he said. “To be that difference maker, to be that one person who decided to make a change … that, to me, would be the hope I never got.”